

Message Text

SECRET

PAGE 01 GABORO 00739 01 OF 03 170031Z
ACTION AF-10

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R 150959Z MAR 78
FM AMEMBASSY GABORONE
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1796
AMEMBASSY PRETORIA
INFO AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN
AMEMBASSY DAR ES SALAAM
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY LUSAKA
AMEMBASSY MAPUTO
USMISSION USUN

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 3 GABORONE 0739

CAPE TOWN FOR EMBASSY

E.O. 11652: XGDS-2
TAGS: PDEV RH SF
SUBJ: RHODESIA: RSF AMBUSH OF BDF PATROL

REF: (A) CAPE TOWN 0433, (B) DAO PRETORIA 0092, (C) GABORONE
0651, (D) STATE 59124, (E) DAO PRETORIA 0109, (F) DAO PRETORIA
0107

1. SUMMARY: AS MIGHT BE EXPECTED, RHODESIAN VERSIONS OF EVENTS
SURROUNDING RECENT RSF/BDF CLASH AT KAZUNGULA CONFLICT WITH
GOB STATEMENTS ON KEY POINTS. EVEN DISPARATE RHODESIAN VERSIONS,
SUCH AS THOSE REPORTED REFS A AND B, ARE AT VARIANCE ON
FUNDAMENTAL FACTS, THEREBY CALLING INTO QUESTION THEIR
ACCURACY. AS IN MOST CLASHES ON REMOTE FRONTIER IN CON-
TINUING RHODESIA GUERRILLA WAR, WE MAY NEVER KNOW THE WHOLE
TRUTH. END SUMMARY.

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 02 GABORO 00739 01 OF 03 170031Z

2. POINTS OF AGREEMENT. THERE IS APPARENT AGREEMENT IN ALL
REPORTS ON FOLLOWING POINTS:

A. A SURPRISE RHODESIAN ATTACK ON BDF TROOPS ON PATROL
TOOK PLACE DURING AN INCURSION BY RSF TROOPS INTO BOTSWANA;

B. BDF TROOPS WERE ATTACKED WHILE IN MILITARY UNIFORM AND

TRAVELING IN LAND ROVERS; AND

C. AFTER AMBUSHING BDF PATROL, RSF UNIT WITHDREW INTO RHODESIA.

3. GOB AND RHODESIAN VERSIONS OF EVENTS DIFFER ON FOLLOWING POINTS:

A. ORIGIN OF ATTACK. RHODESIAN PUBLIC STATEMENTS (REF C) AND CONFIDENTIAL REPORTS PROVIDED EMBASSY CAPE TOWN (REFS A AND B) STATE THAT INCIDENT BEGAN WITH A GUERRILLA ATTACK ON RHODESIAN TROOPS INSIDE RHODESIA. GOB DISCLAIMS ANY KNOWLEDGE OF GUERRILLA ATTACK IN RHODESIA. OFFICIAL STATEMENTS DO NOT REFER TO THIS ATTACK. GOB COMMANDING GENERAL MAINTAINED IN MEETING WITH VISITING AF/S OFFICIAL MACFARLANE AND ME FEBRUARY 27 (DAY OF THE ATTACK) THAT BORDER AREA HAD BEEN QUIET SINCE NOVEMBER. COMMENT: BDF HAS A TOTAL OF SOME 1,000 NEWLY TRAINED RECRUITS AND MAKES NO PRETENSE OF BEING ABLE TO CONTROL THE 400-MILE BORDER WITH RHODESIA.

B. GUERRILLA PRESENCE. RHODESIAN STATEMENTS ALLEGE THAT GUERRILLAS WERE SEEN IN COMPANY OF BDF TROOPS. THESE CLAIMS WERE REJECTED BY VP MASIRE IN HIS MARCH 1 SPEECH TO PARLIAMENT WHEN HE STATED THAT BDF "DID NOT ENCOUNTER ANY GUERRILLAS ON THE DAY OF THE AMBUSH". THIS DENIAL WAS REPEATED BY BDF COMMANDER GENERAL MERAFHE IN RECENT INTERVIEW WITH AFRICAN NEWS SERVICE CORRESPONDENT DON KNOWLER.

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 03 GABORO 00739 01 OF 03 170031Z

C. BDF-GUERRILLA COLLABORATION. RHODESIAN STATEMENTS HAVE ALLEGED BDF "COLLABORATION" WITH GUERRILLAS. THIS CHARGE HAS BEEN REPEATEDLY REFUTED BY GOB, MOST RECENTLY ON MARCH 7 BY GOB CABINET SECRETARY STEENKAMP TO ME IN RE-AFFIRMING GOB POLICY OF ARRESTING, DISARMING AND SENDING TO CAMPS ALL GUERRILLAS ENCOUNTERED IN BOTSWANA.

4. WHILE IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO SORT OUT CONFLICTING CLAIMS WITH CERTAINTY, EMBASSY BELIEVES THAT VERACITY OF RHODESIAN VERSIONS OF EVENTS IS CALLED INTO QUESTION BY OBVIOUS CONTRADICTIONS AMONG VARIOUS RHODESIAN VERSIONS. FOR EXAMPLE, WE NOTE FOLLOWING DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN VERSIONS GIVEN BY HAROLD HAWKINS TO AMBASSADOR BOWDLER (REF A) AND UNNAMED RHODESIAN SOURCE TO PRETORIA DATT (REF B):

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PAGE 01 GABORO 00739 02 OF 03 170031Z
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S E C R E T SECTION 2 OF 3 GABORONE 0739

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CAPE TOWN FOR EMBASSY

A. HOWKINS CLAIMED THAT RHODESIAN ENTERED BOTSWANA TRACKING GUERRILLAS TO "CAMP" WHICH THEY "STAKED OUT" FOR SEVERAL HOURS. DATT SOURCE, HOWEVER, STATES THAT INCURSION RESULTED FROM RSF POLICY OF "HOT PURSUIT" AND THAT BORDER WAS CROSSED DURING "MOVING CONTACT" BETWEEN RSF AND GUERRILLA BAND.

B. HAWKINS' VERSION CLAIMS THAT BDF VEHICLES ENTERED "STAKED OUT" GUERRILLA CAMP AND BEGAN TO TRANSPORT GUERRILLAS, AT WHICH POINT WAITING RSF UNIT OPENED FIRE. DATT'S SOURCE SAID THAT PURSUING RSF TROOPS CAUGHT UP WITH GUERRILLAS AFTER THEY HAD FIRST JOINED BDF UNIT AND SHARP FIREFIGHT ENSUED.

C. HAWKINS' VERSION HOLDS THAT RSF UNIT OPENED FIRE ON BDF VEHICLES BECAUSE THEY WERE TRANSPORTING GUERRILLAS. DATT'S SOURCE, HOWEVER, CLAIMED THAT RSF
SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 02 GABORO 00739 02 OF 03 170031Z

UNIT INITIALLY DID NOT KNOW BDF WAS INVOLVED AND OBEYED ITS STANDING ORDERS TO AVOID CONTACT WITH BDF BY BREAKING OFF ACTION AS SOON AS BDF INVOLVEMENT WAS CONFIRMED.

D. ACCORDING TO HAWKINS, BDF WAS CLEARLY ENGAGED IN "COLLABORATION" WITH GUERRILLAS, DATT'S SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT BDF AND GUERRILLAS MAY HAVE BEEN TOGETHER

BY "ACCIDENT".

E. EMBASSY CAPE TOWN COMMENTED THAT HAWKINS' VERSION REFLECTS AGGRESSIVE HOT PURSUIT POLICY INCLUDING AUTHORITY TO ENGAGE BDF IF "COLLABORATION" WITH GUERRILLAS IS SUSPECTED. THIS APPEARS TO BE AT VARIANCE WITH VERSION OF DATT SOURCE WHO CHARACTERIZED RHODESIANS AS TRYING "ESPECIALLY HARD" TO AVOID INCIDENTS WITH BDF. HAWKINS' VERSION NEVER MENTIONS SYSTEM FOR APPROVAL OF CROSS-BORDER INCURSIONS DESCRIBED BY DATT SOURCE.

5. COMMENT: THE TANGLE OF EVENTS SURROUNDING THIS TRAGIC CLASH MAY NEVER BE COMPLETELY UNRAVALLED. HOWEVER, SOME FACTS ARE BEYOND DISPUTE: FIRST, IT IS GOB POLICY TO DISARM AND HOLD IN REFUGEE CAMPS ANY ARMED GUERRILLAS WHO ENTER BOTSWANA FROM RHODESIA. IN ATTEMPTING TO CARRY OUT THIS POLICY, GENERAL MERAFHE HAS TOLD US, BDF UNITS HAVE IN FACT NARROWLY AVERTED ARMED CLASHES WITH GUERRILLA UNITS WHICH DID NOT WANT TO GIVE UP THEIR ARMS AND ACCEPT INTERNMENT; SECOND, PRESENT BDF STRENGTH IN MANPOWER AND EQUIPMENT DOES NOT ENABLE IT TO ENFORCE THIS POLICY ALONG ENTIRE BORDER WITH RHODESIA; THIRD, IT IS INEVITABLE THAT GUERRILLA BANDS SOMETIMES CROSS INTO BOTSWANA WITH IMPUNITY AND RETURN TO RHODESIA TO CONDUCT AMBUSHES UNDETECTED BY BDF.

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PAGE 01 GABORO 00739 03 OF 03 170032Z
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S E C R E T SECTION 3 OF 3 GABORONE 0739

NOFORN

CAPE TOWN FOR EMBASSY

6. THE ISSUE OF ALLEGED BDF "COLLABORATION" WITH GUERRILLAS IS AN AGONIZING ONE. FROM RHODESIAN POINT OF VIEW, "TERRORISTS" DO NOT AUTOMATICALLY BECOME REFUGEES SIMPLY BY CROSSING BOTSWANA BORDER. MOREOVER, INTERNMENT OF SUCH GUERRILLAS IN CAMPS FROM WHICH THEY ARE LATER FLOWN TO ZAPU CAMPS IN ZAMBIA COULD WELL APPEAR TO BE "COLLABORATION" IN THE EYES OF RHODESIAN MILITARY. FOR ITS PART, GOB POLICY STRICTLY FORBIDS BDF FROM ASSISTING GUERRILLAS. THEY MAY BE "TOGETHER" WHILE GUERRILLAS ARE BEING TRANSPORTED TO CAMPS AFTER THEY HAVE BEEN DISARMED. (THIS TRANSPORTATION MAY IN FACT BE WHAT RSF WITNESSED, MISTAKENLY BELIEVING IT TO BE COLLABORATION IN MILITARY OPERATIONS.) HOWEVER, COMMAND AND CONTROL SYSTEM OF NEWLY FORMED BDF IS STILL ELEMENTARY, AND IT IS NOT IMPOSSIBLE THAT INDIVIDUAL BDF

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SECRET

PAGE 02 GABORO 00739 03 OF 03 170032Z

UNITS HAVE AT TIMES EXCEEDED THEIR STANDING ORDERS IN HANDLING GUERRILLAS. ALTHOUGH GOB POLICY STRICTLY FORBIDS BDF FROM TAKING ON RHODESIAN FORCES EXCEPT IN SELF DEFENSE, THERE CAN BE LITTLE DOUBT WHICH SIDE BDF WOULD TAKE IN CROSSFIRE BETWEEN ESCAPING GUERRILLAS AND RSF UNIT IN "HOT PURSUIT" ON BOTSWANA'S TERRITORY.

7. IN SUMMARY, WE FIND DISTURBING HAWKINS' STATEMENT THAT BDF TRANSPORTATION OF GUERRILLAS CONSTITUTES "COLLABORATION" WHICH ZAMBIAN AND MOZAMBICAN MILITARY ARE "TOO SMART" TO ENGAGE IN. HAWKINS MAY BE CORRECT IN THE SENSE THAT ZAMBIAN AND MOZAMBICAN MILITARY REPORTEDLY STAND ASIDE AND ALLOW THEIR COUNTRIES TO BE USED AS SPRINGBOARDS FOR ATTACKS ON RHODESIA. IT IS ONE OF THE CRUEL IRONIES OF SOUTHERN AFRICA THAT GOB POLICY OF TRYING TO DENY ITS TERRITORY TO GUERRILLAS HAS PLACED ITS INEXPERIENCED AND ILL-EQUIPPED DEFENSE FORCE IN AN EXPOSED POSITION WHERE INCIDENTS SUCH AS RECENT AMBUSH CAN OCCUR. PRESSURES ON GOB ARE INCREASING, ESPECIALLY FROM BLACK AFRICAN STATES, TO CHANGE GOB POLICY AND ALLOW BOTSWANA TERRITORY TO BE USED AS PLATFORM FOR GUERRILLA ACTIONS -- AGAINST RHODESIA AND AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA IN THE FUTURE. PROVOCATIVE ATTACKS SUCH AS THAT OF FEBRUARY 27, WHICH BLATANTLY DISREGARDED GOB'S POLICY OF RESTRAINT AND EFFORTS TO CONTROL GUERRILLAS AND AVOID INCIDENTS, WILL NO DOUBT HELP CHANGE THAT POLICY AND MOVE GOB TO SUPPORT FOR GUERRILLAS OF WHICH IT IS BEING UNJUSTLY ACCUSED. NORLAND

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